

- [So Fervently Do We Believe](#)
- [The Necessity Of Detachment](#)
- [Enlarging The Nervous System](#)
- [Producing Artificial Wants](#)
- [The Parens Patriae Powers](#)
- [The Plan Advances](#)
- [Children's Court](#)
- [Mr.Young's Head Was Pounded To Jelly](#)
- [William Rainey Harper](#)
- [Death Dies](#)
- [The Three Most Popular Books](#)
- [No Place To Hide](#)
- [The Irony Of The Safety Lamp](#)

*Every morning when you picked up your newspaper you would read of some new scheme for saving the world...soon all the zealots, all the Come-Outers, all the transcendentalists of Boston gathered at the Chardon Street Chapel and harangued each other for three mortal days. They talked on nonresistance and the Sabbath reform, of the Church and the Ministry, and they arrived at no conclusions. "It was the most singular collection of strange specimens of humanity that was ever assembled," wrote Edmund Quincy, and Emerson was even more specific: "Madmen, madwomen, men with beards, Dunkers, Muggletonians, Come-Outers, Groaners, Agrarians, Seventh-day Baptists, Quakers, Abolitionists, Calvinists, Unitarians, and Philosophers, all came successively to the top and seized their moment, if not their hour, wherein to chide, or pray, or preach or protest....There was some-thing artificial about the Chardon Street debates, there was a hothouse atmosphere in the chapel. There was too much suffering fools gladly, there was too much talk, too much display of learning and of wit, and there was, for all the talk of tolerance, an unchristian spirit.*

– Henry Steele Commager, Theodore Parker

## **So Fervently Do We Believe**

The cries of true believers are all around the history of schooling, thick as gulls at a garbage dump.

School principal Debbie Reeves of the upscale Barnwell Elementary School in an Atlanta suburb was quoted

recently by the USA Today newspaper as the author of this amazing testimonial of true belief, "I'm not sure you ever get to the point you have enough technology. We just believe so fervently in it."

It's that panting excitement you want to keep an eye out for, that exaggerated belief in human perfectibility that Tocqueville noticed in Americans 170 years ago. The same newspaper article wanders through the San Juan Elementary School in the very heart of Silicon Valley. There, obsolete computers sit idle in neat rows at the back of a spacious media center where years ago a highly touted "open classroom" with a sunken common area drew similar enthusiasm. The school lacks resources for the frequent updates needed to boast state-of-the-art equipment. A district employee said: "One dying technology on top of a former dying technology, sort of like layers of an archaeological dig."

America has always been a land congenial to utopian thought. The Mayflower Compact is a testimonial to this. Although its signers were trapped in history, they were ahistorical, too, capable of acts and conceptions beyond the imagination of their parents. The very thinness of constituted authority, the high percentage of males as colonists—homeless, orphaned, discarded, marginally attached, uprooted males—encouraged dreams of a better time to come. Here was soil for a better world where kindly strangers take charge of children, loving and rearing them more skillfully than their ignorant parents had ever done.

Religion flourished in the same medium, too, particularly the Independent and Dissenting religious traditions of England. The extreme rationalism of the Socinian heresy and deism, twin roots of America's passionate romance with science and technology to come, flourished too. Most American sects were built on a Christian base, but the absence of effective state or church monopoly authority in early America allowed 250 years of exploration into a transcendental dimension no other Western nation ever experienced in modern history, leaving a wake of sects and private pilgrimages which made America the heir of ancient Israel—a place where everyone, even free thinkers, actively trusted in a god of some sort.

Without Pope or Patriarch, without an Archbishop of Canterbury, the episcopal principle behind state and corporate churches lacked teeth, allowing people here to find their own way in the region of soul and spirit. This turned out to be fortunate, a precondition for our laboratory policy of national utopianism which required that every sort of visionary be given scope to make a case. It was a matter of degree, of course. Most Americans, most of the time, were much like people back in England, Scotland, Scandinavia, Germany, and Ireland, from which domains they had originally derived. After all, the Revolution itself was prosecuted by less than a quarter of our population. But enough of the other sort existed as social yeast that nobody could long escape some plan, scheme, exhortation, or tract designed to lead the faithful into one or another Promised Land. For the most part, Old Testament principles reigned, not New, and the Prophets had a good part of the national ear.

From 1830 to 1900, over one thousand utopian colonies flourished around the country, colonies which mixed the races, like Fanny Wright's Neshoba in Tennessee, colonies built around intensive schooling like New Harmony in Indiana, colonies which encouraged free love and commonly shared sexual partners as did the Perfectionists at Oneida in upstate New York. In the wonderful tapestry of American utopian thought and practice, one unifying thread stands out clearly. Long before the notion of forced schooling became household reality, utopian architects universally recognized that schooling was the key to breaking with the past. The young had to be isolated, and drilled in the correct way of looking at things or all would fall apart when they grew up. Only the tiniest number of these intentional communities ever did solve that problem, and so almost all vanished after a brief moment. But the idea itself lingered on.

In this chapter I want to push a bit into the lure of utopia, because this strain in human nature crisscrosses the growth curve of compulsion schooling at many junctures. Think of it as a search for the formula to change human nature in order to build paradise on earth. Such an idea is in flagrant opposition to the dominant religion of the Western world, whose theology teaches that human nature is permanently flawed, that all human salvation must be individually undertaken.

Even if you aren't used to considering school this way, it isn't hard to see that a curriculum to reach the first end

would have to be different from that necessary to reach the second, and the purpose of the educator is all important. It is simply impossible to evaluate what you see in a school without knowing its purpose, but if local administrators have no real idea why they do what they do—why they administer standardized tests, for instance, then any statement of purpose made by the local school can only confuse the investigator. To pursue the elusive purpose or purposes of American schooling as they were conceived about a century ago requires that we wander afield from the classroom into some flower beds of utopian aspiration which reared their head in an earlier America.

## The Necessity Of Detachment

Hertzler's *History of Utopian Thought* traces the influence of Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, a book you need to know something about if you are ever to adequately understand the roots of modern schooling. Hertzler makes a good case from the testimony of its founders that the Royal Society itself arose from the book's prophetic scheme of "Salomon's House," a world university assembling the best of universal mankind under its protection. One of its functions: to oversee management of everything.

*New Atlantis* had immense influence in England, Germany, Italy, and France. In France it was considered the principal inspiration of the *Encyclopedia* whose connection to the American Revolution is a close one. That story has been told too many times to bear repeating here. Suffice it to say that the very same triangle-encased eye that appears on the back of the American dollar appears as the center of Solomon's Temple in early eighteenth-century French artistic representations.

One consistent requirement of utopian procedure is the *detachment* of its subjects from ordinary human affairs. Acting with detached intelligence is what utopians are all about, but a biological puzzle intrudes: detaching intelligence from emotional life isn't actually possible. The feat has never been performed, although imaginative writers are endlessly intrigued by the challenge it presents. Sherlock Holmes or Mr. Spock of *Star Trek* fame come to mind.

Utopian thinking is intolerant of variety or competition, so the tendency of modern utopians to enlarge their canvas to include the whole planet through multinational organizations becomes disturbing. Utopians regard national sovereignty as irrational and democracy as a disease unjustified by biological reality. We need one world, they say, and that one world should (reasonably) be under direction of the best utopians. Democracy degrades the hierarchy necessary to operate a rational polity. A feature of nearly all utopias has been addiction to elaborate social machinery like schooling and to what we can call *marvelous machinery*. Excessive human affection between parents, children, husbands, wives, et al., is suppressed to allow enthusiasm for machine magic to stand out in bold relief.

It is useful to remember that Britain's Royal Society was founded not in the pursuit of pure knowledge and not by university dons but by practical businessmen and noblemen concerned with increased profits and lower wages.

## Enlarging The Nervous System

There is a legend that in lost Atlantis once stood a great university in the form of an immense flat-topped pyramid from which star observations were made. In this university, most of the arts and sciences of the present world were contained. Putting aside that pleasant fancy which we can find clearly reflected on the obverse of our American Great Seal, almost any early utopia holds a profusion of inside information about things to come. In 1641 Bishop

John Wilkins, a founder of the Royal Society, wrote his own utopia, *Mercury: or the Secret and Swift Messenger*. Every single invention Wilkins imagined has come about: "a flying chariot," "a trunk or hollow pipe that shall preserve the voice entirely," a code for communicating by means of noise-makers, etc. Giphantia, by de la Roche, unmistakably envisions the telephone, the radio, television, and dehydrated foods and drinks. Even the mechanisms suggested to make these things work are very like the actual ones eventually employed.

Marshall McLuhan once called on us to notice that all machines are merely extensions of the human nervous system, artifices which improve on natural apparatus, each a utopianization of some physical function. Once you understand the trick, utopian prophecy isn't so impressive. Equally important, says McLuhan, the use of machinery causes its natural flesh and blood counterpart to atrophy, hence the lifeless quality of the utopias. Machines dehumanize, according to McLuhan, wherever they are used and however sensible their use appears. In a correctly conceived demonology, the Devil would be perceived as a machine, I think. Yet the powerful, pervasive influence of utopian reform thinking on the design of modern states has brought utopian mechanization of all human functions into the councils of statecraft and into the curriculum of state schooling.

An important part of the virulent, sustained attack launched against family life in the United States, starting about 150 years ago, arose from the impulse to escape fleshly reality. Interestingly enough, the overwhelming number of prominent social reformers since Plato have been childless, usually childless men, in a dramatic illustration of escape-discipline employed in a living tableau.

## Producing Artificial Wants

Beginning about 1840, a group calling itself the Massachusetts School Committee held a series of secret discussions involving many segments of New England political and business leadership.<sup>1</sup> Stimulus for these discussions, often led by the politician Horace Mann, was the deterioration of family life that the decline of agriculture was leaving in its wake.<sup>2</sup>

A peculiar sort of dependency and weakness caused by mass urbanization was acknowledged by all with alarm. The once idyllic American family situation was giving way to widespread industrial serfdom. Novel forms of degradation and vice were appearing.

And yet at the same time, a great opportunity was presented. Plato, Augustine, Erasmus, Luther, Calvin, Hobbes, Rousseau, and a host of other insightful thinkers, sometimes referred to at the Boston *Athenaeum* as "The Order of the Quest," all taught that without compulsory universal schooling the idiosyncratic family would never surrender its central hold on society to allow utopia to become reality. Family had to be discouraged from its function as a sentimental haven, pressed into the service of loftier ideals—those of the perfected State.

Mann saw that society's "guards and securities" had to increase because an unsuspected pathological phenomenon was following the introduction of mass production into life. It was producing "artificial wants." It was multiplying the temptation to accumulate *things*. But the barbarous life of the machine laborer made family ideals a hollow mockery. Morality could no longer be taught by such families. Crime and vice were certain to explode unless children could be pried away from their degraded custodians and civilized according to formulas laid down by the best minds.

Barnas Sears, Mann's Calvinist colleague, saw the rapid growth of commercial mass entertainment catering to dense urban settlements as "a current of sensuality sweeping everything before it." Former bucolics, who once looked to nature for entertainment, were now pawns in the hands of worldly wisemen vending commercial amusement. Urban confinement robbed men and women of their ability to find satisfaction outside the titillation of mechanical excitation. Whoever provided excitement became the master.

Mann's other colleague, George Boutwell, who would inherit the leadership of New England education from Sears,

argued that a course must be selected from which there could be no turning back. Urbanization spelled the collapse of worker families; there was no remedy for it. Fathers were grossly diverted by nonagricultural labor from training their own children. Claims of a right to society and fashion led to neglect by mothers, too. "As in some languages there is no word which expresses the true idea of home," said Boutwell, "so in our manufacturing towns there are many persons who know nothing of its reality."

Mann proclaimed the State must assert itself as primary parent of children. If an infant's natural parents were removed—or if parental ability failed (as was increasingly certain)—it was the duty of government to step in and fill the parent's place. Mann noted that Massachusetts had a long tradition of being "parental in government." His friend Sears described the State as "a nourishing mother, as wise as she is beneficent. Yet, should difficulties arise, the State might become stern—as befits a ruling *patriarch*." (emphasis added)

Much light on these developments is shed by Michael Katz's *The Irony of Early School Reform* and by Joel Spring's historical writings. Both writers are recommended for a dense mine of information; both strike a good balance between the perspective supplied by their personal philosophies and reportage without allegiance to any particular dogma.

The decline of American agriculture was part of a movement to replicate the centralized pattern found in Britain, which had deliberately destroyed its own small farm holdings by 1800. Agriculture had been conducted on a capitalist basis in Britain since the notorious enclosure movement prompted by the growth of farming. In its first stage, peasants were displaced to make room for large-scale pasture farming. The second displacement transformed the small farmer into the "farm hand" or the factory worker.

Capitalist farming was established in Britain side by side with a growing manufacturing industry which made it possible to rely on the import of foodstuffs from abroad. Freely imported food meant cheap food. Cheap food meant cheap labor. The development of factory farming in America (and Australia) provided an outlet for the investment of surplus capital at good rates of interest; hence the decline of small farming in America was hastened considerably by direct inducements from its former motherland. Although as late as 1934, 33 percent of American employment was still in agriculture (versus 7 percent in Great Britain), the curriculum of small farm, which encouraged resourcefulness, independence, and self-reliance, was fast giving way to the curriculum of government education which called for quite a different character.

## The *Parens Patriae* Powers

The 1852 compulsory schooling legislation of Massachusetts represents a fundamental change in the jurisprudence of parental authority, as had the adoption act passed by the nearly identically constituted legislature just four years prior, the first formal adoption legislation anywhere on earth since the days of the Roman Empire. Acts so radical could not have passed silently into practice if fundamental changes in the status of husbands and wives, parents and children, had not already gravely damaged the prestige of the family unit.

There are clear signs as far back as 1796 that elements in the new American state intended to interpose themselves in corners of the family where no European state had ever gone before. In that year, the Connecticut Superior Court, representing the purest Puritan lineage of original New England, introduced "judicial discretion" into the common law of child custody and a new conception of youthful welfare hardly seen before outside the pages of philosophy books—the notion that each child had an *individual* destiny, a private "welfare" *independent of what happened to the rest of its family*.

A concept called "psychological parenthood" began to take shape, a radical notion without legal precedent that would be used down the road to support drastic forcible intervention into family life. It became one of the basic justifications offered during the period of mass immigration for a compulsion law intended to put children under the thrall of so-called scientific parenting in schools.

Judicial discretion in custody cases was the first salvo in a barrage of poorly understood court rulings in which American courts *made* law rather than interpreted it. These rulings were formalized later by elected legislatures. Rubber-stamping the *fait accompli*, they marked a restructuring of the framework of the family ordered by a judicial body without any public debate or consent. No precedent for such aggressive court action existed in

English law. The concept lived only in the dreams and speculations of utopian writers and philosophers.

The 1840 case *Mercein v. People* produced a stunning opinion by Connecticut's Justice Paige—a strain of radical strong-state faith straight out of Hegel:

The moment a child is born it owes allegiance to the government of the country of its birth, and is entitled to the protection of the government.

As the opinion unrolled, Paige further explained "with the coming of civil society the father's sovereign power passed to the chief or government of the nation." A part of this power was then transferred back to both parents *for the convenience of the State*. But their guardianship was limited to the legal duty of maintenance and education, while absolute sovereignty remained with the State.

Not since John Cotton, teacher of the Boston church in the early Puritan period, had such a position been publicly asserted. Cotton, in renouncing Roger Williams, insisted on the absolute authority of magistrates in civil *and* religious affairs, the quintessential Anglican position. In later life he even came to uphold the power of judges over conscience and was willing to grant powers of life and death to authorities to bring about conformity. Thus did the Puritan rebellion rot from within.

A few years after the Paige ruling, American courts received a second radical authorization to intervene in family matters, "the best interest of the child" test. In 1847, Judge Oakley of New York City Superior Court staked a claim that such power "is not unregulated or arbitrary" but is "governed, as far as the case will admit, by fixed rules and principles." When such fixed rules and principles were not to be found, it caused no problem either, for it was only another matter subject to court discretion.

In the fifty-four-year period separating the Massachusetts compulsion school law/adoption law and the founding of Children's Court at the beginning of the twentieth century in Chicago, the meaning of these decisions became increasingly clear. With opposition from the family-centered societies of the tidewater and hill-country South diminished by civil war, the American state assumed the *parens patriae* powers of old-time absolute kings, the notion of the political state as the primary father. And there were signs it intended to use those powers to synthesize the type of scientific family it wanted, for the society it wanted. To usher in the future it wanted.

## The Plan Advances

In the space of one lifetime, the United States was converted from a place where human variety had ample room to display itself into a laboratory of virtual orthodoxy—a process concealed by dogged survival of the mythology of independence. The cowboy and frontiersman continued as film icons until 1970, living ghosts of some collective national inspiration. But both died, in fact, shortly after Italian immigration began in earnest in the 1880s.

The crucial years for the hardening of our national arteries were those between 1845 and 1920, the immigration years. Something subtler than Anglo-Saxon revulsion against Celt, Latin, and Slav was at work in that period. A utopian ideal of society as an orderly social hive had been transmitting itself continuously through small elite bodies of men since the time of classical Egypt. New England had been the New World proving ground of this idea. Now New England was to take advantage of the chaotic period of heavy immigration and the opportunity of mass regimentation afforded by civil war to establish this form of total State.

The plan advanced in barely perceptible stages, each new increment making it more difficult for individual families to follow an independent plan. Ultimately, in the second and third decades of the twentieth century—decades which gave us Adolf Hitler, Prohibition, mass IQ-testing of an entire student population, junior high schools, raccoon coats, Rudy Vallee, and worldwide depression—room to breathe in a personal, peculiar, idiosyncratic way just ran out. It was the end of Thomas Jefferson's dream, the final betrayal of democratic promise in the last new world on

the planet.

When you consider how bizarre and implausible much of the conformist machinery put in place during this critical period really was—and especially how long and successfully all sorts of people resisted this kind of encroachment on fundamental liberty—it becomes clear that to understand things like universal medical policing, income tax, national banking systems, secret police, standing armies and navies which demand constant tribute, universal military training, standardized national examinations, the cult of intelligence tests, compulsory education, the organization of colleges around a scheme called "research" (which makes teaching an unpleasant inconvenience), the secularization of religion, the rise of specialist professional monopolies sanctioned by their state, and all the rest of the "progress" made in these seventy-five years, you have to find reasons to explain them. Why then? Who made it happen? What was the point?

## Children's Court

The very clear connection between all the zones of the emerging American hive-world are a sign of some organized intelligence at work, with some organized end in mind.<sup>1</sup> For those who can read the language of conventional symbolism, the philosophical way being followed represents the extraordinary vision of the learned company of deists who created the country coupled to the Puritan vision as it had been derived from Anglo-Normans—descendants of the Scandinavian/French conquerors of England—those families who became the principal settlers of New England. It is careless to say that bad luck, accident, or blind historical forces caused the trap to spring shut on us.

Of the various ways an ancient ideal of perfected society can be given life through institutions under control of the State, one is so startling and has been realized so closely it bears some scrutiny. As the hive-world was being hammered out in the United States after 1850, the notion of unique, irreplaceable natural families came increasingly to be seen as the major roadblock in the path of social progress toward the extraordinary vision of a machine-driven, utopian paradise. To realize such a theory in practice, families must be *on trial* with each other constantly and with their neighbors, just as a politician is ever on trial. Families should be conditional entities, not categories absolute. This had been the operational standard of the Puritan settlement in America, though hardly of any other region (unless the Quaker/Pietist sections of the middle colonies who "shunned" outcasts, even if family). If, after testing, an original mother and father did not suit, then children should be removed and transferred to parent-surrogates. This is the basis of foster care and adoption.

By 1900, through the agency of the radical new Denver/Chicago "Children's Court," one important machine to perform this transfer function was in place. Children need not be wasted building blocks for the State's purpose just because their natural parents had been. The lesson the new machine-economy was teaching reinforced the spiritual vision of utopians: perfect interchangeability, perfect subordination. People could learn to emulate machines; and by progressive approximations they might ultimately become as reliable as machinery. In a similar vein, men and women were encouraged through easy divorce laws and ever-increasing accessibility to sexually explicit imagery, to delay choosing marriage mates. With the mystery removed, the pressure to mate went with it, it was supposed. The new system encouraged "trials," trying on different people until a good fit was found.

<sup>1</sup>The paradox that a teenage female in the year 2000 requires parental permission to be given Tylenol or have ears pierced but not, in some states, to have an abortion suggests the magnitude of the control imposed and at least a portion of its purpose.

## Mr. Young's Head Was Pounded To Jelly

The most surprising thing about the start-up of mass public education in mid-nineteenth-century Massachusetts is

how overwhelmingly parents of all classes soon complained about it. Reports of school committees around 1850 show the greatest single theme of discussion was conflict between the State and the general public on this matter. Resistance was led by the old yeoman class—those families accustomed to taking care of themselves and providing meaning for their own lives. The little town of Barnstable on Cape Cod is exemplary. Its school committee lamented, according to Katz's *Irony of Early School Reform*, that "the great defect of our day is the absence of governing or controlling power on the part of parents and the consequent insubordination of children. Our schools are rendered inefficient by the apathy of parents."

Years ago I was in possession of an old newspaper account which related the use of militia to march recalcitrant children to school there, but I've been unable to locate it again. Nevertheless, even a cursory look for evidence of state violence in bending public will to accept compulsion schooling will be rewarded: Bruce Curtis' book *Building the Education State 1836-1871* documents the intense aversion to schooling which arose across North America, in Anglican Canada where leadership was uniform, as well as in the United States where leadership was more divided. Many schools were burned to the ground and teachers run out of town by angry mobs. When students were kept after school, parents often broke into school to free them.

At Saltfleet Township in 1859 a teacher was locked in the schoolhouse by students who "threw mud and mire into his face and over his clothes," according to school records—while parents egged them on. At Brantford, Ontario, in 1863 the teacher William Young was assaulted (according to his replacement) to the point that "Mr. Young's head, face and body was, if I understand rightly, pounded literally to jelly." Curtis argues that parent resistance was motivated by a radical transformation in the intentions of schools—a change from teaching basic literacy to molding social identity.

The first effective American compulsory schooling in the modern era was a reform school movement which Know-Nothing legislatures of the 1850s put into the hopper along with their radical new adoption law. Objects of reformation were announced as follows: Respect for authority; Self-control; Self-discipline. The properly reformed boy "acquires a fixed character," one that can be planned for in advance by authority in keeping with the efficiency needs of business and industry. Reform meant the total transformation of character, behavior modification, a complete makeover. By 1857, a few years after stranger-adoption was kicked off as a new policy of the State, Boutwell could consider foster parenting (the old designation for adoption) "one of the major strategies for the reform of youth."<sup>1</sup> The first step in the strategy of reform was for the State to become de facto parent of the child. That, according to another Massachusetts educator, Emory Washburn, "presents the State in her true relation of a parent seeking out her erring children."

The 1850s in Massachusetts marked the beginning of a new epoch in schooling. Washburn triumphantly crowed that these years produced the first occasion in history "whereby a state in the character of a common parent has undertaken the high and sacred duty of rescuing and restoring her lost children...by the influence of the school." John Philbrick, Boston school superintendent, said of his growing empire in 1863, "Here is *real* home!" (emphasis added) All schooling, including the reform variety, was to be in imitation of the best "family system of organization"; this squared with the prevalent belief that delinquency was not caused by external conditions—thus letting industrialists and slumlords off the hook—but by deficient homes.

Between 1840 and 1860, male schoolteachers were cleansed from the Massachusetts system and replaced by women. A variety of methods was used, including the novel one of paying *women* slightly more than *men* in order to bring shame into play in chasing men out of the business. Again, the move was part of a well-conceived strategy: "Experience teaches that these boys, many of whom never had a mother's affection...need the softening and refining influence which woman alone can give, and we have, wherever practicable, substituted female officers and teachers for those of the other sex."

A state report noted the *frequency* with which parents coming to retrieve their own children from reform school were met by news their children had been given away to others, through the state's *parens patriae* power. "We have felt it to be our duty *generally* to decline giving them up to their parents and have placed as many of them as we could with farmers and mechanics," reads a portion of Public Document 20 for the state of Massachusetts,

written in 1864. (emphasis added) To recreate the feelings of parents on hearing this news is beyond my power.

The reader will recall such a strategy was considered for Hester Prynne's child, Pearl, in Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. That Hawthorne, writing at mid-century, chose this as a hinge for his characterization of the fallen woman Hester is surely no coincidence.

## William Rainey Harper

Three decades later at the University of Chicago, William Rainey Harper, former Chautauqua wizard, began a revolution that would change the face of American university education. Harper imported the university system of Germany into the United States, lock, stock, and barrel. Undergraduate teaching was to be relegated to a form of Chautauqua show business, while research at the graduate level was where prestige academic careers would locate, just as Bacon's *New Atlantis* had predicted. Harper, following the blueprint suggested by Andrew Carnegie in his powerful "Gospel of Wealth" essays, said the United States should work toward a unified scheme of education, organized vertically from kindergarten through university, horizontally through voluntary association of colleges, all supplemented by university extension courses available to everyone. Harper wrote in 1902:

The field of education is at the present time in an extremely disorganized condition. But the forces are already in existence [to change that]. Order will be secured and a great new system established, which may be designated "The American System." The important steps to be taken in working out such a system are coordination, specialization and association.

Harper and his backers regarded education purely as a commodity. Thorstein Veblen describes Harper's revolution this way:

The underlying business-like presumption accordingly appears to be that learning is a merchantable commodity, to be produced on a piece-rate plan, rated, bought and sold by standard units, measured, counted, and reduced to staple equivalence by impersonal, mechanical tests.

Harper believed modern business enterprise represented the highest and best type of human productive activity. He believed business had discovered two cosmic principles—techniques implicit in the larger concept of survival of the fittest: consolidation and specialization. Whatever will not consolidate and specialize must perish, he believed. The conversion of American universities into a system characterized by institutional giantism and specialization was not finished in Harper's lifetime, but went far enough that in the judgment of the *New York Sun*, "Hell is open and the lid is off!"

Harper's other main contribution to the corporatization of U.S. scholarly life was just as profound. He destroyed the lonely vocation of great teacher by trivializing its importance. Research alone, objectively weighed and measured, subject to the surveillance of one's colleagues would, after Harper, be the *sine qua non* of university teaching:

Promotion of younger men in the departments will depend more largely upon the results of their work as investigators than upon the efficiency of their teaching.... In other words, it is proposed to make the work of investigation primary, the work of giving instruction secondary.

Harper was the middleman who introduced the organization and ethics of business into the world of pedagogy. Harper-inspired university experience is now virtually the only ritual of passage into prosperous adulthood in the United States, just as the Carnegie Foundation and Rockefeller's General Education Board willed it to be. Few young men or women are strong enough to survive this passage with their humanity wholly intact.

## Death Dies

In 1932, John Dewey, now elevated to a position as America's most prominent educational voice, heralded the end of what he called "the old individualism." Time had come, he said, for *a new individualism* that recognized the radical transformation that had come in American society:

Associations, tightly or loosely organized, more and more define opportunities, choices, and actions of individuals.

Death, a staple topic of children's books for hundreds of years because it poses a central puzzle for all children, nearly vanished as theme or event after 1916. Children were instructed indirectly that there was no grief; indeed, an examination of hundreds of those books from the transitional period between 1900 and 1916 reveals that Evil no longer had any reality either. There was no Evil, only bad attitudes, and those were correctable by training and adjustment therapies.

To see how goals of utopian procedure are realized, consider further the sudden change that fell upon the children's book industry between 1890 and 1920. Without explanations or warning, timeless subjects disappeared from the texts, to be replaced by what is best regarded as a political agenda. The suddenness of this change was signaled by many other indications of powerful social forces at work: the phenomenal overnight growth of "research" hospitals where professional hospital-ity replaced home-style sick care, was one of these, the equally phenomenal sudden enforcement of compulsory schooling another.

Through children's books, older generations announce their values, declare their aspirations, and make bids to socialize the young. Any sudden change in the content of such books must necessarily reflect changes in *publisher* consciousness, not in the general class of book-buyer whose market preferences evolve slowly. What is prized as human achievement can usually be measured by examining children's texts; what is valued in human relationships can be, too.

In the thirty-year period from 1890 to 1920, the children's book industry became a creator, not a reflector, of values. In any freely competitive situation this could hardly have happened because the newly aggressive texts would have risked missing the market. The only way such a gamble could be safe was for total change to occur *simultaneously* among publishers. The insularity and collegiality of children's book publishing allowed it this luxury.

One aspect of children's publishing that has remained consistent all the way back to 1721 is the zone where it is produced; today, as nearly three hundred years ago, the Northeast is where children's literature happens—inside the cities of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. No industry shift has ever disturbed this cozy arrangement: over time, concentration became even more intense. Philadelphia's role diminished in the twentieth century, leaving Boston and New York co-regents at its end. In 1975, 87 percent of all titles available came from those two former colonial capitals, while in 1876 it had been "only" 84 percent, a marvelous durability. For the past one hundred years these two cities have decided what books American children will read.

Until 1875, about 75 percent of all children's titles dealt with some aspect of the future—usually salvation. Over the next forty years this idea vanished completely. As Comte and Saint-Simon had strongly advised, the child was to be relieved of concerning itself with the future. The future would be arranged *for* children and for householders by a new expert class, and the need to do God's will was now considered dangerous superstition by men in charge.

Another dramatic switch in children's books had to do with a character's dependence on *community* to solve problems and to give life meaning. Across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, strength, afforded by stable community life, was an important part of narrative action, but toward the end of the nineteenth century a totally new note of "self" was sounded. Now protagonists became more competent, more in control; their need for family and communal affirmation disappeared, to be replaced by a new imperative—the quest for certification by *legitimate* authority. Needs now suddenly dominant among literary characters were so-called "expressive needs": exploring,

playing, joy, loving, self-actualizing, *intriguing against one's own parents*. By the early twentieth century, a solid majority of all children's books focus on the individual child *free from the web of family and community*.

This model had been established by the Horatio Alger books in the second half of the nineteenth century; now with some savage modern flourishes (like encouraging active indifference to family) it came to totally dominate the children's book business. Children were invited to divide their interests from those of their families and to concentrate on private concerns. A few alarmed critical voices saw this as a strategy of "divide and conquer," a means to separate children from family so they could be more easily molded into new social designs. In the words of Mary Lystad, the biographer of children's literary history from whom I have drawn heavily in this analysis:

As the twentieth century continued, book characters were provided more and more opportunities to pay attention to themselves. More and more characters were allowed to look inward to their own needs and desires.

This change of emphasis "was managed at the expense of others in the family group," she adds.

From 1796 to 1855, 18 percent of all children's books were constructed around the idea of conformity to some adult norm; but by 1896 emphasis on conformity had *tripled*. This took place in the thirty years following the Civil War. Did the elimination of the Southern pole of our national dialectic have anything to do with that? Yes, everything, I think. With tension between Northern and Southern ways of life and politics resolved permanently in favor of the North, the way was clear for triumphant American orthodoxy to seize the entire field. The huge increase in conformist themes rose even more as we entered the twentieth century and has remained at an elevated level through the decades since.

What is most deceptive in trying to fix this characteristic conformity is the introduction of an apparently libertarian note of free choice into the narrative equation. Modern characters are encouraged to self-start and to proceed on what appears to be an independent course. But upon closer inspection, that course is always toward a *centrally prescribed* social goal, never toward personal solutions to life's dilemmas. Freedom of choice in this formulation arises from the *feeling* that you have freedom, not from its actual possession. Thus social planners get the best of both worlds: a large measure of control without any kicking at the traces. In modern business circles, such a style of oversight is known as management by objectives.

Another aspect of this particular brand of regulation is that book characters are shown being *innovative*, but innovative only in the way they arrive at the same destination; their emotional needs for self-expression are met harmlessly in this way without any risk to social machinery. Much evidence of centralized tinkering within the factory of children's literature exists, pointing in the direction of what might be called Unit-Man—people as work units partially broken free of human *community* who can be moved about efficiently in various social experiments. William Rainey Harper, president of the University of Chicago, thought of such an end as "laboratory research aimed at designing a rational utopia."

To mention just a few other radical changes in children's book content between 1890 and 1920: school credentials replace experience as the goal book characters work toward, and child labor becomes a label of condemnation in spite of its ancient function as the quickest, most reliable way to human independence—the way taken in fact by Carnegie, Rockefeller, and many others who were now apparently quite anxious to put a stop to it.

Children are encouraged *not to work at all until* their late teen years, sometimes not until their thirties. A case for the general superiority of youth working instead of idly sitting around in school confinement is often made prior to 1900, but never heard again in children's books after 1916. The universality of this silence is the notable thing, deafening in fact.

Protagonists' goals in the new literature, while apparently individualistic, are almost always found being pursued through social institutions—those ubiquitous "associations" of John Dewey— never through family efforts. Families are portrayed as good-natured dormitory arrangements or affectionate manager-employee relationships, but emotional commitment to family life is noticeably ignored. Significant family undertakings like starting a farm or teaching each

other how to view life from a multi-age perspective are so rare that the few exceptions stand out like monadnocks above a broad, flat plain.

### Three Most Significant Books

The three most influential books ever published in North America, setting aside the Bible and *The New England Primer*, were all published in the years of the utopian transformation of America which gave us government schooling: *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly* (1852), a book which testifies to the ancient obsession of English-speaking elites with the salvation of the under-classes; *Ben-Hur* (1880), a book illustrating the Christian belief that Jews can eventually be made to see the light of reason and converted; and the last a pure utopia, *Looking Backwards* (1888), still in print more than one hundred years later, translated into thirty languages.<sup>1</sup>

In 1944, three American intellectuals, Charles Beard, John Dewey, and Edward Weeks, interviewed separately, proclaimed Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards* second only to Marx's *Das Kapital* as the most influential book of modern times. Within three years of its publication, 165 "Bellamy Clubs" sprouted up. In the next twelve years, no less than forty-six other utopian novels became best sellers.

Was it Civil War, chaos, decades of mass immigration, or a frightening series of bloody national labor strikes shattering our class-free myths that made the public ready for stories of a better tomorrow? Whatever the cause or causes, the flowering communities of actual American utopianism took on real shape in the nineteenth century, from famous ones like Owenite communities and Fourierian *phalansteres* or Perfectionist sexual stewes like Oneida, right down to little-known oddities, like Mordecai Noah's "*Ararat*," city of refuge for Jews. First they happened, then they were echoed in print, not the reverse. Nothing in the human social record matches the outburst of purely American longing for something better in community life, the account recorded in deeds *and* words in the first full century of our nationhood.

What Bellamy's book uncovered in middle-class/upper-middle-class consciousness was revealing—the society he describes is a totally *organized* society, all means of production are in the hands of State parent-surrogates. The conditions of well-behaved, middle-class childhood are recreated on a corporate scale in these early utopias. Society in Bellamy's ideal future has eliminated the reality of democracy, citizens are answerable to commands of industrial officers, little room remains for self-initiative. The State regulates all public activities, owns the means of production, individuals are transformed into a unit directed by bureaucrats.

Erich Fromm thought Bellamy had missed the strong similarities between corporate socialism and corporate capitalism—that both *converge* eventually in goals of industrialization, that both are societies run by a managerial class and professional politicians, both thoroughly materialistic in outlook; both organize human masses into a centralized system; into large, hierarchically arranged employment-pods, into mass political parties. In both, alienated corporate man—well-fed, well-clothed, well-entertained—is governed by bureaucrats. Governing has no goals beyond this. At the end of history men are not slaves, but robots. This is the vision of utopia seen complete.

<sup>1</sup>Economist Donald Hodges' book, *America's New Economic Order*, traces the intellectual history of professionalism in management (John Kenneth Galbraith's corporate "Technostructure" in *The New Industrial State*) to *Looking Backwards* which described an emerging public economy similar to what actually happened. Hodges shows how various theorists of the utopian transition like John Dewey and Frederick Taylor shaped the regime of professional managers we live under.

### No Place To Hide

How could the amazing lives of George Washington, Andrew Jackson, the John D. Rockefellers, Margaret Fuller,

Amy Lowell, my own immigrant McManuses, Gattos, Zimmers, Hoffmans, and D'Agostinos, have added up to this lifeless utopia? Like a black hole it grew, although no human being flourishes under such a regime or rests easily inside the logic of hundreds of systems intermeshing into one master system, all demanding obedience from their human parts. Here is a materialistic inverse of Ezekiel's spiritual vision of wheels within wheels.

In a *New York Times* description of the first "Edison Project" school in Sherman, Texas—a system of proprietary schools supplying a home computer for every child, e-mail, longer school days and years, and "the most high-tech school in America" (as Benno Schmidt, former president of Yale, put it)—the local superintendent gloated over what he must have regarded as the final solution to the student-control issue: "Can you imagine what this means if you're home sick? The teacher can just put stuff in the student's e-mail....There's no place to hide anymore!"

### The Irony Of The Safety Lamp

Have I made too much of this? What on earth is wrong with wanting to help people, even in institutionalizing the helping urge so it becomes more reliable? Just this: the helping equation is not as simple as utopians imagined. I remember the shock I felt on many occasions when my well-meant intercession into obvious problems a kid was having were met with some variation of the angry cry, "Leave me alone!" as if my assistance actually would have made things worse. It was baffling how often that happened, and I was a well-liked teacher. Is it possible there are hills that nature or God demands we climb alone or become forever the less for having been carried over them?

The plans of true believers for our lives may well be better than our own when judged against some abstract official standard, but to deny people their personal struggles is to render existence absurd. What are we left with then besides some unspeakable Chautauqua, a liar's world which promises that if only the rules are followed, good lives will ensue? Inconvenience, discomfort, hurt, defeat, and tragedy are inevitable accompaniments of our time on earth; we learn to manage trouble by managing trouble, not by turning our burden over to another. Think of the mutilated spirit that victims of overprotective parents carry long after they are grown and gone from home. What should make you suspicious about School is its relentless *compulsion*. Why should this rich, brawling, utterly successful nation ever have needed to resort to *compulsion* to push people into school classes—unless advocates of forced schooling were driven by peculiar philosophical beliefs not commonly shared?

Another thing should concern you, that the consequences of orthodox mass schooling have never been fully thought through. To show you what I mean, consider the example of Sir Humphrey Davy, inventor of the coalmine "safety" lamp after an 1812 explosion in which ninety-two boys and men were killed. Davy's assignment to the honor roll of saintliness came from his assertion that the sole object of his concern was to "serve the cause of humanity"—a declaration made credible by his refusal to patent the device.

Let nobody deny that the safety lamp decreased the danger of explosion relative to older methods of illumination, but the brutal fact is that many more miners died because of Davy's invention. It allowed the coal industry to grow rapidly, bringing vastly more men into the mines than before, opening deeper tunnels, exposing miners to mortal dangers of which fire-damp is only one, dangers for which there is no protection. Davy's "safety" lamp brought safety only in the most ironic sense; it was a profit-enhancement lamp most of all. Its most prominent effect was to allow the growth of industry, a blessing to some, a curse to others, but far from an unambiguous good because it wasted many more lives than it saved.

Serving "the cause of humanity" through forced government schooling may also turn out to be a stranger matter than it appears, another Davy lamp in different costume.

